

*Roll up, roll up for Hollywood's*

# CARNIVAL OF HORRORS

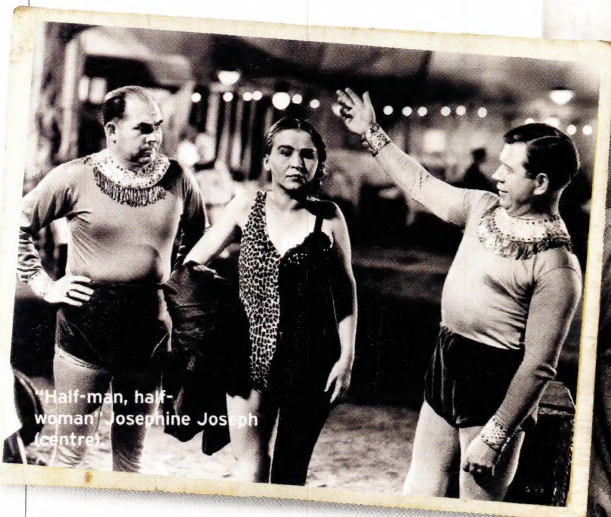
*Think Hostel was shocking? The most bizarre, bad-taste film ever made was shot 75 years ago within the sanctity of the Hollywood system. Enter the unfathomable, unthinkable world of Freaks...*

WORDS ADAM SMITH



The cast members of *Freaks* were recruited from various carnival sideshows.





"Half-man, half-woman" Josephine Joseph (centre)



The Siamese twin sisters Daisy and Violet Hilton. Far less hideous than Paris and Nicole...

### WHEN HE WALKED INTO THE MGM

commissary one Monday morning in the autumn of 1931, F. Scott Fitzgerald's career was on the skids. The chronicler of the Jazz Age, author of such classics as *The Great Gatsby* and *The Diamond As Big As The Ritz*, was failing. His alcoholism was in full bloom, and the day before it had eaten a little further into his professional prospects. He had been invited to one of MGM vice-president Irving Thalberg's legendary Sunday brunches and had, predictably, disgraced himself, scarfing cocktail after cocktail and then sang an unwelcome ditty about a dying dog to his unamused companions. Even in his inebriated state, he had caught the look of disapprobation on Thalberg's face. It's fair to say, then, that on this Monday morning he was in a particularly fragile state. But what he saw as he walked in would have tested anyone's constitution.

Around one of the large commissary tables was gathered what could best be described as a human menagerie: dwarves and midgets stood on the chairs; pinheads with tiny, pointed craniums and bulging eyes – the males dressed for some reason in women's clothing – were being fed by a bearded woman; a pair of armless ladies ate with their feet; Siamese twins chatted to themselves, while a man who appeared to have no body below the middle of his chest perched on his arms, rocking back and forth. On another chair was parked what appeared to be a human being with neither arms nor legs, just a torso with glinting eyes and a ferocious moustache. Fitzgerald paused, turned on his heel, left the building and puked.

It is unrecorded whether Tod Browning, the ringmaster of this ghastly spectacle, was present when Fitzgerald's stomach rendered its verdict. He was, after all, busy, in the midst of making the single most bizarre movie ever to come out of a Hollywood studio: *Freaks*.

### THERE ARE, AS THE PROVERB GOES,

a thousand beginnings to any story, and the dark tale of *Freaks* is no exception. It could have its roots in the craze for the macabre and terrifying that was gripping American cinemagoers at the

**AROUND ONE OF THE TABLES WAS A HUMAN MENAGERIE: DWARVES AND MIDGETS STOOD ON THE CHAIRS; PINHEADS WITH TINY CRANIUMS WERE FED BY A BEARDED WOMAN.**

beginning of the 1930s: the past few years had seen Universal's horror cycle (the term "horror movie" was coined at the beginning of the decade) wow audiences with tales of vampires and stitched-together monsters. It might have been the result of director Tod Browning's own obsession with the deformed and physically warped. His oeuvre included silent classics such as *The Unholy Three* (1930), with Lon Chaney, and there was speculation much later that he himself may have been horribly maimed, castrated even, in a car accident.

But we might just as well start the story in a small house, in a run-down neighbourhood of Baltimore 20 years before, in the late summer of 1911. Number 622, North Milton Avenue, was a "row house", the equivalent of a terrace, and on the rain-drenched night of August 27, it was the scene of a birth.

### AMELIA ECKHARDT LAY ON HER BED IN

the throes of labour as the thunder rumbled outside. The first child, the first of what would turn out to be twin boys, was healthy and physically normal, but the second child was a different matter. As he lay on the blanket, a neighbour who had attended the birth screamed and fainted. "He was like a broken doll," she said later. The boy was missing both legs, but not only that, though his arms were of normal length, his torso was drastically foreshortened; he was a fragment of a child. The midwife, expecting him to die, initially balked at signing a birth certificate.

But he did survive – in fact, he thrived. His parents named him **John** after his father, but he preferred **Johnny**. He soon learned to walk on his hands with amazing dexterity, and as he grew he became something of a neighbourhood celebrity. At school his classmates vied for the privilege of carrying him up the stairs. He was bright, and determined to achieve something in life despite his disability; in the end he would succeed because of it. It was inevitable that at some point he would be spotted by one of the travelling carnivals that specialised in human oddities. Thus he found himself in a world of grotesques. There were the geek-pits – sunken holes in which terminal alcoholics would obligingly gibber, writhe and bite the heads off rats in return for their next drink. Tents would beckon punters with the promise of seeing pinheads or "the missing link" – in fact, people born with microcephaly, abnormally small craniums (occasionally these unfortunates were advertised, exotically, as being "Australians") – while bearded ladies, human skeletons and limbless wonders plied their garish trade.

Unbeknown to "Eck", the man who would make sure that millions of punters would have an unwelcome chance to experience this form of entertainment had lived an uncannily similar life. Tod Browning had, according to his own unreliable accounts of his early years, run away with the circus aged 12 or 18 or something in between, having been enraptured by one of the side-show dancers. It was a life that suited him; within a few years his CV included turns as an



escapologist (he performed a popular version of the old “buried alive” trick), a contortionist and a blackface comedian – the second half of an act rejoicing in the name The Lizard And The Coon.

During this period, carnivals and the motion pictures existed in an uneasy, symbiotic relationship. The movies had evolved from the popular magic-lantern shows at which those unwilling to brave the geek-pit or the – ahem – Australians marvelled. It was no surprise, then, that D. W. Griffith, the real father of American cinema, had toured with carnivals, nor that unusual that he and Browning should come into each other’s orbit. Their first collaboration was on a short, *Scenting A Terrible Crime*, in which Browning played second fiddle to a bowl of stinking sauerkraut. It would be the start of his film career, but he never forgot his roots; you could, it turned out, take the boy out of the carny but not the carny out of the boy. As he began his long ascent to the position of hit Hollywood director, he always remembered the creatures squirming in the geek-pit or behind the ballyhoo artist’s screen. In early 1931, working on a new and secret project, he sent scouts out to the world’s carnivals and travelling sideshows. In the Canadian Exposition of that year, one of them came across Johnny Eck and invited him to Hollywood. Eck, by now styling himself “The King Of The Freaks”, liked the sound of the movies and headed across America to the Dream Factory.

A 20-kilogram Norwegian rat that also auditioned at the time sadly didn’t make the cut.

Angeleno, a DISTORTED DWARF, capers with her! Schlitz, a PIN-HEADED GIRL, chants idiotically as she plucks the petals of a daisy! The BEARDED LADY sews tiny garments! Rosie and Mamie, SIAMESE TWINS, dance with Cuckoo, the BIRD GIRL!”

On reading the opening scene, Thalberg is reported to have held his head in his hands. “I guess I asked for horrible,” he moaned. “I certainly got it.” The story, much altered from *Spurs*, concerned Hans, a dwarf who falls for a trapeze artiste who betrays him, exacting a terrible revenge (SPOILER ALERT) – during a thunderstorm she’s attacked by the massed freaks and transformed into a hen woman.

Johnny Eck was among the first to arrive in Hollywood, but after him came the deluge. There was Prince Randian, “The Human Torso”, who had neither legs nor arms but who wriggled and rolled his way around the set; Koo Koo “The Dancing Bird Girl From Mars”, a deformed, nearly blind wretch who sat motionless for most of the time except when required to shuffle around in a mouldering feathered costume. There was Elizabeth Green, “The Stork Woman”, who, according to contemporary accounts, “resembled a cross between a crane and a shaved Dachshund”; Josephine Joseph, who may or may not have been an hermaphrodite (she wouldn’t let anyone check); the Hilton sisters, Siamese twins from England; Martha “The Armless Wonder”, who would alarm F. Scott Fitzgerald by eating daintily with her feet; Zip and Pip,



**ONE WOMAN SUED MGM, CLAIMING THAT BROWNING’S FILM HAD CAUSED HER MISCARRIAGE. CUTS WERE INEVITABLE AND DEEP, BUT BROWNING’S CAREER NEVER RECOVERED.**

## BROWNING HAD FINALLY PERSUADED

Irving Thalberg to greenlight *Freaks* in 1931, although its source material, a grotesque short story titled *Spurs*, had been brought to the studio a few years before by Harry Earles, a 39-inch dwarf (brother of the similarly diminutive Daisy Earles, billed as “The Midget Mae West”), who envisioned himself in the lead (indeed, Earles would star in *Freaks* as Hans, the sexually jealous midget, though it would not be this role for which he would be most remembered – he played the third member of the Lollipop Guild in *The Wizard Of Oz*). Thalberg was aware that a fad for horror was underway, and may have been kicking himself that he’d loaned out Tod Browning, who was an MGM-contracted director, to Universal to direct *Dracula*, which had been a smash hit for the rival studio. He acquiesced to Browning’s demand that a screenplay be written based upon *Spurs*, which was delivered to him after half a dozen writers had toiled on it. The original screenplay has been lost, but a contemporaneous synopsis gives a flavour of the first few pages of the script:

“A HUMAN SKELETON is sprawled lazily in the grass. Little Martha, with FOUR-INCH LEGS and NO ARMS dances about him! Little



Harry Earles (left) plays the diminutive Hans, who becomes jealous of Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova, right) when her affections are taken by another man.





The *Freaks* menagerie. "Not one of them had a good word for the others," director Tod Browning remarked.

pinheads from Coney Island accompanied by fellow microcephalic Schlitz (named after the beer company who had once sponsored him). There were dwarves and midgets, a bad-tempered bearded lady called Olga Roderick, and Peter Robinson, "The Living Skeleton", who weighed just over 27 kilograms but was married to the 210 kilogram fat woman Bunny Smith in order to exploit the startling contrast.

MGM head Louis B. Mayer, whose catholic tastes would stretch to the wholesome likes of Andy Hardy movies and lavishly staged musicals, not armless wonders or dancing cuckoo people from whichever planet of the solar system they hailed, regarded the whole project with undisguised disgust, but he trusted Thalberg's judgment, and Thalberg was keen. An internal studio memo makes it clear that *Freaks* was intended to be one of the big-hitters of 1932: "Get the boss started on Tod Browning's *Freaks* and he'll keep it up for hours," it reads. "Which is a 100 per cent guarantee we have one of our standard box office properties for 1932."

The shooting of *Freaks* appears to have gone relatively smoothly, though characterisations of both director and cast vary wildly. With the exception of Schlitz, the pinhead who would sit

happily all day in his little smock watching the action, and Johnny Eck, whom he befriended, Browning found the freaks to be hard work. "The level of professional jealousy was amazing," he remarked. "Not one of them had a good word for the others – of course, each of them had been a star in the sideshow world. I had to humour them as no Hollywood star was ever humoured." The strategy didn't always work. "You could never tell what they might do," he complained. "Most of them are either imbecile or abnormal and not responsible. Once in a while they became upset and would vent their rage by biting the person nearest to them. I was bitten once."

Prince Randian, "The Human Torso", had a more inventive method of venting his frustrations. He would conceal himself in cupboards or dark corners and enjoy terrifying passers-by with loud, unexpected shrieks.

The cast had been sequestered in an apartment off the lot (the MGM publicity department, desperately trying to keep the grotesque project under wraps, had advised against putting them in a hotel and released only pictures of the physically normal cast to the press), and made the most of their glamorous new status. "They started wearing sunglasses

## Briefing

# FREAKS

**Release date:** February 20, 1932

**Director:** Tod Browning

**Cast:** Olga Baclanova, Wallace Ford, Leila Hyams, Harry Earles, Johnny Eck

**The plot:** A trapeze artist (Baclanova) marries a sideshow midget, Hans (Earles), because she thinks he's rich. However, after she mocks the circus freaks who are his friends, and plots to kill her spouse, the freaks strike back.

**The controversy:** Reaction to the film, considered grotesque and exploitative, was so negative that Browning's career never recovered. Indeed, *Freaks* was banned in the UK for 30 years.

**Influence:** Numerous references in everything from *The Player* to *The Simpsons*. *The Mutations* (1974) recreated scenes from the film, and Bill Griffith's Zippy, the "pinhead", is based in part on the character Schlitz in *Freaks*.

and acting funny," said Johnny Eck. "They really went all 'Hollywood'."

Reactions to the shoot on the lot could most generously be described as mixed; F. Scott Fitzgerald wasn't the only one to feel queasy. An appalled producer proposed that he and like-minded writers march on Thalberg's office – presumably with flaming torches – to demand the movie be stopped. An editor who was put to work on the footage spoke for many when he announced, "It was bad enough to see them during the day when you went down to the set, but when you had to look at it on the Moviola for 18 hours a day, it drove you up the walls."

Shooting concluded in late 1931 and Thalberg decided to screen it in a couple of theatres to see what he had got. He soon found out. Within minutes of the film starting, a woman stood up, let out a banshee wail and ran out of the theatre, followed by a steady stream of green-faced cinemagoers. After a second screening another woman sued MGM, claiming that Browning's masterpiece had caused her miscarriage. Cuts to the film were inevitable and deep. The running time was reduced to barely an hour – sequences removed included an image of the strong man singing falsetto (the implication being that the freaks had castrated him), as well as the detail of the freaks drooling into the shared wine-cup during the infamous wedding banquet.

But nothing helped. *Freaks* was pulled from theatres within days, and would finally lose MGM \$164,000. Tod Browning's career would never recover from the disaster, with the director kept on a short leash with later genre fare such as 1936's *The Devil-Doll*. After *Freaks* was pulled from theatres, he never spoke about it again, right up until his death in 1962.

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Above: Olga Baclanova as Cleopatra. Left: Harry Earles demonstrates the size of his love. The tiny star would later famously feature as the third member of the Lollipop Guild in *The Wizard Of Oz*.

## ZIP AND PIP RETURNED TO CONEY ISLAND, GROUND ZERO FOR THE MACABRE AND THE LOCATION WHERE TOPSY THE BAD ELEPHANT WAS EXECUTED.

### THE FAILURE OF FREAKS AT THE BOX

office, together with the opprobrium poured on Browning and MGM for subjecting an appalled public to it, meant that there were no lavish premiere parties or fawning press interviews for Browning's strange cast. Many quietly vanished back to the carnys and circuses; back to the geek-pits and freak-shows from where they had emerged for their brief spell in the Hollywood spotlight. The pinheads, Zip and Pip, returned to Coney Island, ground zero for the bizarre and macabre. (You had to be exceedingly odd to even raise an eyebrow there. This, after all, was the same location that had staged the infamous execution of Topsy The Bad Elephant, whose crime had been to kill her keeper, probably



in objection to his habit of feeding her lit cigarettes. Topsy's demise was achieved using a gargantuan "electric chair" designed by the Edison Light Company. One-and-a-half-thousand spectators gasped as the switch was thrown and 6,000 volts was poured through the murderous mammal, causing her feet to explode in plumes of smoke. It was a long time ago, and they did things differently in those days.)

Some, like Olga Roderick, the bearded lady, would barely be seen again (her caustic view of the film was that it was "an insult to freaks everywhere"). Josephine Joseph, the half-man, half-woman, would go to the grave with no-one certain if she was a true hermaphrodite or not. Martha "The Armless Wonder", Koo Koo "The Dancing Bird Girl From Mars" and "The Living Skeleton" would be among the many who seemingly died anonymous deaths, but some are traceable, emerging from the strange tapestry of carny history with stories of astonishingly rich and diverse lives. Prince Randian, occasionally now billed as "The Human Worm", continued to tour with P. T. Barnum, displaying his astonishing dexterity by rolling and lighting cigarettes with his mouth. He was fluent in Hindi, German and French and married, living with his wife and children in Patterson, New Jersey, until his death in 1934. Daisy and Violet Hilton, the Siamese twins, continued to work, often in vaudeville and made two other film appearances, *Chained For Life* (1951) and its sequel, the unreleased *Torn By A Knife*. They were both married and

divorced, perhaps more for publicity purposes than anything else, and the latter part of their lives was spent working in a grocery store after a carnival inexplicably moved on without them. They died in January 1969 of influenza. Angelo Rossitto, the midget, continued his career in films. He was Shirley Temple's stunt double, as well as appearing in dozens of movies, usually in roles such as "Dwarf Lab Assistant" (*Mesa Of Lost Women*, 1953) or "Smallest Moon Man" (*Jungle Moon Men*, 1955). He introduced himself to a new generation of filmgoers as Master Blaster in 1985's *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*. He retired shortly after and died at the age of 83.

And then there was Johnny Eck. Eck made only one more film appearance, as a "Gooney-Bird" in *Tarzan Escapes*, but his success as a sideshow attraction continued and he toured with a 12-piece orchestra, playing the piano. His fame increased when magician Rabsid Rasha devised an unbeatable version of the "sawing in half" trick which involved Eck, his twin brother and a midget. He later retired from showbiz and returned to Baltimore with his brother. By the '70s he was an admired screen painter, though after he was the victim of a violent burglary, his attitude to his hometown soured. "If I want to see freaks now, all I need to do is look out of the window," he declared. When asked about his role in the most notorious film in studio history he said: "I have met hundreds and thousands of people, and none finer than the midgets and the Siamese twins and the caterpillar man and the bearded woman and the human seal with the little flippers for hands... God, it was a great adventure." He died in the same house in which he'd been born; the house where the woman had whispered that he was a broken doll and had fainted dead away; where the midwife balked at signing a birth certificate, an act, it had seemed to her, of reckless optimism. It was 1991. He was 79 years old. ■